



Transformation of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces

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The South Caucasus region is bounded by the Black Sea in the west and the Caspian Sea in the east, by Russia in the north, Turkey in the west and Iran in the south. This region, in combination with the Russian North Caucasus, is often regarded as the land bridge where the East and the West meet. Within this geographically confined space three small, yet completely dissimilar nations have emerged – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The history of the region and the present character of its peoples are inextricably tied to the legacy of the several empires that have ruled over this region. Each left a legacy, for better or worse, within the three nations. Despite this legacy, or in some cases even because of it, each country has managed to develop their own distinct character, culture and history.

Like its neighbors in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan has a storied history. Baku, its capital, was a sacred place for Zoroastrians because of the many natural fires fueled by escaping gas. Over the centuries it was dominated by Persians, Byzantines, Armenians, and Turks before its annexation by the Tsar in 1813. From that time, except for a short period of freedom from 1918 to 1920, it was a part of the Russian-Soviet Empire. As the Soviet Union disintegrated, the Caucasus nations saw their opportunity and, following the Georgian lead, Azerbaijan declared its independence in August 1991.

Despite the borders of present nation, Azerbaijan encompasses only a portion of the land actually inhabited by ethnic Azerbaijanis. A full two thirds of the regional Azerbaijani population lives to the south, across the Aras River, in northwestern Iran. There they account for 24 percent of the Iranian population, with the city of Tabriz as their historic capital. This came about through ongoing conflicts for domination of the Caucasus between Persia and Russia, primarily through the first (1812-1813) and second (1826-1828) Russo-Persian Wars. Both of which ended in significant defeats for Persia allowing Russia to consolidate its rule over the entire Caucasus region, and defining the northern border of Persia, and later Iran, as the Aras River.



SEEKING NATO INTEGRATION

Since independence Azerbaijan has worked to develop closer ties with the West and is actively pursuing NATO integration. In support of this goal it provided a 34-member unit in Kosovo as part of a Turkish-led force under

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Azerbaijani Armed Forces officers participate in USAWC-conducted NATO Operations Seminar

NATO supervision; however, this unit was withdrawn following Kosovo's declaration of independence. In addition, Azerbaijani troops participate in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. These experiences compliment the continuing modernization and professionalization of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces.

In support of these efforts the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) utilizes traveling contact teams (TCT) under the auspices of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's (CJCS) Joint Contact Team Program. As part of its mission to provide support to the Combatant Commanders, the U.S. Army War College (USAWC) conducted a TCT seminar in Azerbaijan September 9-11, 2008 that addressed *U.S. / NATO Military Organization, Operations & Standardization*. The USAWC team consisted of Professor Bernard F. Griffard and Colonel James W. Shufelt, Jr. from the Center for Strategic Leadership (CSL).

The 16 Azerbaijani military participants ranged in rank from First Lieutenant (02) to Colonel/CAPT (06), and represented their Ministry of Defense, the General Staff, and the operational forces. Drawing from NATO operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan and from personal experience, the team provided these officers with a perspective on NATO military structure; the national and NATO roles of U.S. organizations; command relationships, and the procedures for Task Force development. Stressing the key role that NATO military standards (STANAGS) and standardization play in successful operations, the Azerbaijani planners were introduced to techniques for integrating NATO requirements into their operating and strategic planning procedures.



Colonel James Shufelt discusses NATO operational techniques

Throughout the seminar the Azerbaijani officers exhibited a high level of interest and discussions were open and free flowing. The senior officers encouraged active participation by the two Infantry Battalion Commanders and three junior officers from the Peacekeeping Battalion that had served with NATO and U.S. Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Their practical experiences provided valuable insights to the audience as a whole. At the conclusion of the seminar the participants identified the need to maintain the momentum of ongoing efforts to further professionalize their Armed Forces. They highlighted the need for more in-country English classes along with assistance in improving the professional military education for both commissioned and non-commissioned officers.

CHALLENGES OF INDEPENDENCE

Progress towards integration into NATO, and military professionalization and modernization must be accomplished within a complicated geo-political environment. Azerbaijan entered this most recent era of independence saddled with

mixed blessings. On the plus side the nation possesses large energy reserves that promise a high level of economic growth as they are developed. On the minus side, it is a country split by an ethnic and territorial conflict.

“You know we are at war”

Similar to Yugoslavia, the present borders of the nations of Armenia and Azerbaijan were finally defined in the 20th century neither by natural progression or self determination. Rather, they evolved through the actions of victorious leaders dividing up regions as they saw fit without the appropriate consideration of the natural borders between nations. It was not until 1936 that Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin decided to recognize each as a separate republic within the Soviet Union. However, in keeping with Stalin’s policy of “divide and rule” he went against the wishes of the Armenian leadership and declared the Nagorno-Karabakh region as part of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). He awarded the region the highest level of autonomy, designating it the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, or NKAO. This action also formalized the regions borders. Despite the actions of the Soviet leadership in Moscow, the government of the Azerbaijani SSR did not legally recognize NKAO as a cohesive province within the Azerbaijani SSR.

As an ethnic, Armenian populated province of Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh’s demonstrated desire for independence and/or unification with Armenia was a source of armed conflict prior to and following Azerbaijan independence in

The Minsk Group

Co-Chairs: France, Russia and the United States.

Participating States: Belarus, Germany, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Turkey, as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan.

1991. The shooting war lasted until a Russian-brokered ceasefire in 1994. Over the intervening years all attempts to resolve the conflict, undertaken unilaterally by the United States and Russia and through the auspices of the Minsk Group, an organization specifically formed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to address the conflict, have failed to find a compromise acceptable to all parties. The Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 will most likely only serve to further complicate the situation. Though our guidelines specifically put a discussion of a U.S. position on Nagorno-Karabakh off the table, we were able to explore the participants’ underlying concerns.

The recognition of Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence by the United States and the European Union followed by Russia’s declaration of independent status for Georgia’s South Ossetia and Abkhazia provinces raised fears that the international community will allow Nagorno-Karabakh to follow suit. Such a situation could trigger another military confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan and could also provide an opportunity for Russia to impose a large “peacekeeping” force in the South Caucasus region. Such a scenario would most likely impact the growing economy by shrinking foreign investment, resulting in a slowdown of the modernization of the Armed Forces.

“...considerable energy resources brighten its long-term prospects.”

With the end of the Tsarist monopoly in the early 1870’s Baku experienced its first energy-fueled period of economic prosperity. Investment by the Nobels and the Rothschilds resulted in the development of major oilfields supported by modern infrastructure. Though ethnic strife destroyed much of the infrastructure in 1905, Baku was still a major energy resource at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution.¹ Today, in addition to being a key oil and natural gas producer, Azerbaijan is the origin for the Baku-T’bilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, the only major petroleum transit infrastructure from the Caucasus not controlled by Russia. Our personal observations while in Baku confirm the CIA World Factbook assessment that large oil profits are providing a big boost to infrastructure modernization efforts. However, based on these observations, it appears many of the new commercial and residential structures are, at best, only partially occupied. These buildings may be more a mechanism to launder money than human shelters or modern business sites. Although Baku is becoming a showplace, the Azeri hinterland is apparently not sharing in the government’s largesse. In the long term, failure to improve the transportation and housing infrastructure throughout the country may become a drag on sustained economic growth.

1. King, Charles, *The Ghost of Freedom*, (New York: Oxford University Press 2008) 150. King points out that in 1914 there were 2,541 oil wells in Baku, and that at the time of the Bolshevik revolution over 150 oil companies were active in the city.

“Azerbaijan is located in a tough neighborhood...”

*“Azerbaijan is located in a tough neighborhood where countries are under tremendous pressure to keep their distance from the United States.”*² When United States Senator Richard Lugar made this observation in January 2008 he could not have foreseen how tough this neighborhood would become. The Russian invasion of Georgia and the message it sent to all Caucasus countries altered the political environment. Azerbaijan’s geographic location requires full consideration of the concerns of their neighbors. Russia and Iran prefer cooler relations with the West, while Turkey is a member of NATO and a backer of Azerbaijan’s integration into the Alliance. Though President Ilham Aliyev has named NATO integration as a top foreign policy priority for Azerbaijan, progress is measured.³ However, the government is still committed to the professionalization and modernization of the Armed Forces.

SUPPORTING TRANSFORMATION

In support of this goal the USEUCOM security cooperation efforts that lead to the growth of professionalism and technical proficiency of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces should continue to receive emphasis. Within the professional military education sector it is important to focus efforts on tomorrow’s leaders and strategists. The new generation of officers encountered during this TCT has the experience of working with NATO forces and possess the leadership traits required to form the backbone of the modern Azeri Armed Forces.



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2. Lugar, Richard, *Lugar offers repeal of Jackson-Vanik for Azerbaijan*, Press Release January 29, 2008
 3. Khazri Bakinsky and Mina Muradova, “Azerbaijan Pursues NATO Integration,” *Eurasia Insight*, March 16, 2007, [eurasianet.org, http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav031607.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav031607.shtml).

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